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ABSTRACT

The current crisis in the field of comparative education is one of methodology: the quasi-scientific approach, which is widely used and expensively funded, necessarily jettisons a whole range of variables which are not measurable and which may well have more explanatory power. The quantitative studies have not been shown to yield anything which is of much use to teachers, researchers, policy makers, or administrators. At the same time, those researchers who adopt a more naturalistic methodology have had few generalizable insights to offer. Although much of the research has provided feedback for professional and practical education, it has largely failed in getting to the point of actually making comparisons because existing methodologies are inadequate to the task. Another major problem affecting the field has been the way in which Western values have infected the analyses of non-Western educational systems. Researchers (especially those involved with underdevelopment) have not remained scientifically neutral, have too often played advisory and advocacy roles, and have thus helped to perpetuate dependency and exploitative relationships. Comparative education should return to the goals of its pioneers, and approach the systematic study of the educational problems and proposed solutions of other countries and cultures in terms of the difficulties diagnosed in society. The tensions in the discipline of comparative education will be resolved only if it is generally recognized that the question of what can and cannot be done in the study of foreign countries is a moral one. (KH)

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COMPARATIVE EDUCATION: PHOENIX OR DODO?

by

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Comparative and International Education Society (11th, Hamilton, New Zealand, 21-24 August, 1983).

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COMPARATIVE EDUCATION: PHOENIX OR DODO?

BARRY A. SHEEHAN

I hope I might be forgiven for breaking with what has always appeared to me to be a rather ridiculous academic convention (designed to convey the full flavour of "objectivity" or "neutrality"?) by writing this paper in the first person. In 1982, in the presidential address to the Australian Comparative and International Education Society,[1] I drew out several long-standing concerns I have about Comparative and International Education. While I was gratified that my comments were provocative - to judge from the post-session arguments which ensued - I was disturbed that at least a few people either felt threatened by my remarks or categorized me as a cynic or pessimist, of which I am neither.

Consequently, I have chosen to follow through on my earlier comments by interpreting and applying the conference theme in an idiosyncratic way. The them is, of course, "The contribution of comparative and international studies to the theory and practice of education", and it raises for me the question as to whether I (and those few scholars I know who would actually respond to the question, "What do you do for a living?" by answering, "I'm in Comparative Education?) have been wasting our time. Quite frankly, I must admit to being ambivalent about that, for while I am fairly convinced that Comparative and International Education have a great deal to offer in terms of our understanding of educational structures, processes, change and societal functions, I do not think it has come close or yet shows signs of coming close, to fulfilling that potential.

That is not to suggest that I might justifiably re-title this paper "Reflections on a Useless Life" or "Is Comparative Education Worth the Paper It's Written On?" because not only am I convinced about the potential of Comparative and International Studies, but I enjoy, in the active, pleasurable sense, my involvement in the field. "I'm in Comparative Education" may not have quite the ring to it of "I'm in oil" or even, perhaps, "I'm a sociologist". On the other hand, the field is not really bedevilled by the tag of "discipline", and while at one level we do more than our share of endless searching for conceptual needles in theoretical haystacks, comparativists always have the immediate challenge and gratification of cross-cultural contact, and of seeking meaning on a number of levels.

Certainly, a lot of what passes for Comparative and International Education probably is a waste of the paper it's written on, but then so is a lot of what passes for sociology, philosophy, economics, journalism and the rest. (In passing, I wonder whether the increasing problem of print-pollution might be solved if the publish-or-perish syndrome were to be replaced by a rule which limited each academic writer to one published 7,000 word paper each year. "Please write for supporting materials"). But much of the writing - whether descriptive/analytical, methodological, theoretical or comparative - is of assistance in sensitizing, informing and challenging our understandings. I therefore skim as widely as I can: it is a rare book or paper or thesis which adds nothing to one's thinking. It is probably a curiosity to some of my colleagues that, despite all the wonderful radical critiques and emergent (or resurgent) theories around these days, I also still insist that my students read the good ole structural-functionalists and come to grips with the way those writers see and

interpret the world before they examine a range of alternatives and critiques. This is simply to establish a "bench-mark" against which competing assumptions and interpretations can be reviewed: a stable backdrop of critique piled upon critique and a measure of the semantic gamespersonship of academia. To quote from a long-forgotten source:

> Once you know "where it's at" you can be sure that it's not there any more. Positivism, interactionism, structuralism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology and political economy have each been "in", only to be as quickly "out". Durkheim, Weber, Althusser, Schultz, Cicourel and Gintis have each staggered on to the stage only to be cried down before their conceptual stripping act was complete. The epistemic community (or sodality of sociologists) has been like a group of young prostitutes each so worried about her uplift that her basic client relationship is ignored. The productive endeavour has been unproductivity with the latest paper, which presents a political economic critique of the ethnomethodological extension of phenomenology's disucssion of the structuralist attack on the interactionist restatement of positivism guaranteed of at least five rejoinders.

To the extent that Comparative and International Education has allowed itself to get caught up in the game, it has risked self-inflicted destruction. And this is where I take issue with those whose consuming passion is methodology. In this connection, however, I am not prepared to agree with Laska that there are "questions much more basic than methodology".[2] Laska does not appear to recognize that the questions to which he addresses himself - as to whether comparative education is a professional or an academic (scholarly) field; whether it constitutes an independent academic field or a dependent one (having just decided that it is not an <u>academic</u> field at all, but a professional one); and whether, as a dependent field (the obvious response to the previous question), on which academic (read "respectable"?) field is it dependent? - are very largely contingent upon the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the enterprise. And it

does strike me as inconsistent that, having dismissed comparative studies of education as dependent, Laska then labels "foundations of education" as a "discipline", when, by the criteria he employed to "torpedo" comparative education, foundations are clearly equally dependent, and for that reason create, at best, a sub-discipline, or more accurately, a branch of many disciplines, forming a composite around the given focus on education as an institution. But I do not really care what we call it.

In my view, better data and more imaginative theory are extremely important, and we should not view progress in research as a reflection of increasing methodological rigour alone, but I am nevertheless inclined to believe that the "identity" crisis of comparative education is, at bottom, a crisis of methodology.

While comparative education does not have the elements of a public paradigm on the Kuhn model, there are perhaps possibilities for a quasi-paradigm developed around a set of dimensions such as those suggested by Holt and Richardson[3] indicating the rules of interpretation, the puzzle defining aspects, criteria of admissability, the ontological-predictive element and the conceptual and theoretical elements. Clearly, methodological issues can never be resolved unless there is a close articulation between theory building and methodology. So it is not the <u>concern</u> with methodology which I am challenging here. What continues to disturb me is the tendency of our most eminent methodologists (for whom I have the highest personal and professional respect, incidentally) to neglect the <u>applied</u> dimensions of their work, which has stemmed, for the most part, from philosophy of science. There is a sense in which the philosopher of science or the 'pure' methodologist stands in the same relation to the 'field' as the theatre critic to the realities of the theatre.

We are deluding ourselves if we believe that reliability, precision and certitude can be attained by the application of specified techniques. Social scientists have to deal with multiple-parameter systems in which interactions between components are complex and over-perturbed. I therefore sympathize rather more with the researcher who tackles the issues, who tries to come to grips with the problems of research in the field, than with the methodological critic who takes it apart ex post facto. Again, I am not suggesting that methodology or theory are unimportant - indeed, I tire of explaining to my students that all research embodies theory and methodology (good or bad), and the problem is to explicate them.

A related difficulty with my view (i.e. a further area of ambivalence), is that a great deal of research in many areas has become conditioned to a peculiarly instrumental and opportunistic orientation through which much professional activity is channelled into a service function which is largely controlled by national and international funding agencies.

Most research involves expense, and funds are difficult to come by in the institutions to which we are normally limited. This means that in seeking funds wer have to think in terms not only of what will appeal to the funding agencies, and have to tailor submissions in relation to guidelines which may not be at all sympathetic to the kinds of work we wish to do, but we must also pander to the political/power realities of the money brokers. And that results, I think, in many of us being either forced to prostitute ourselves to these demands or to change our primary fields of interest.

Interestingly, our(?) most highly visible achievement, which embodies all the problems of methodology and this instrumental orientation, has been on the road for well over a decade now.

> Significantly some of the first initiatives came from American scholars and were backed by American funds. Europe initiated and Europe financed studies have so far been few and far between. Perhaps the happiest example of a jointly financed and cooperatively planned international study is the [I.E.A. project]: this was planned at the UNESCO Institute of Education in Hamburg, and financed by the U.S. Office of Education (for the international costs of project) and by national funding agencies in [various] countries (for the field operations). This project constitutes a model of international academic cooperation: it shows that it is possible to achieve solid results through the sharing of responsibilities across many national teams and it shows how UNESCO and other international bodies can perform an important brokerage function in linking up American and European initiatives.[4]

Of course, I would be the last to pose questions about I.E.A., the answers to which might reflect poorly upon the comparative education community at large - e.g. apart from a few "heavies", who largely devised and coordinated the project, how many of the people involved are comparative educationists? My observations indicate very few. Most have been statisticians, psychometricians, educational psychologists, subject-specialists, etc. (It is possible now, however, that comparativists will use the data to advantage). Second, how do you feed a habit like that? I estimate the international costs of I.E.A. to be in excess of $10 million). At the Western States Comparative and International Society Conference, Snowbird, Utah, October 17-19, 1974, Postlethwaite described the I.E.A. study as "the advent of large scale empirical studies" in comparative education. That may well be true, but there are some big questions to be asked before we become too enthusiastic about launching ourselves in that direction. Chiefly, of course, there is the problem of how we get logically from broad theoretical formulations to indicated empirical research. Masses of data have been collected in education. We seem to have counted almost everything we can count, and a lot of things we can't. And much of

this data is interlaced either with generally contested assumptions or with unidentified and often unrecognized normative judgments.

A.C. MacIntyre, in reflecting upon whether a science of comparative politics is possible, illustrates aspects of this point very clearly.

> There was once a man who aspired to be the author of the general theory of holes. When asked 'What kind of hole - holes dug by children in the sand for amusement, holes dug by gardeners to plant lettuce seedlings, tank traps, holes made by roadmakers?' he would reply indignantly that he wished for a general theory that would explain all of these. He rejected ab initio the - as he saw it - pathetically common-sense view that of the digging of different kinds of holes there are quite different kinds of explanations to be given; why then he would ask do we have the concept of a hole? Lacking the explanations to which he originally aspired, he then fell to discovering statistically significant correlations; he found for example that there is a correlation between the aggregate hole-digging achievement of a society as measured, or at least one day to be measured, by econometric techniques, and its degree of technological development. The United States surpasses both Paraguay and Upper Volta in hole digging. He also discovered that war accelerates hole digging; there are more holes in Vietnam than there were. These observations, he would always insist, were neutral and value-free. This man's achievement has passed totally unnoticed except by me. Had he however turned his talents to political science, had he concerned himself not with holes, but with modernisation, urbanisation or violence, I find it difficult to believe that he might not have achieved high office in the American Political Science Association.[9]

The I.E.A. study is, then, subject to the standard critique of empiricism. Frankly, I prefer my empiricism to come a little cheaper. The major difficulty I find with the quasi-scientific approach, even in smaller studies, is that the research is necessarily forced to jettison a whole range of variables which are not measurable and which may well have more explanatory power than those which are retained as elements of the research. That is a necessary feature of quantitative studies which leads

to one of the curiosities of research in that its focus tends to concentrate on partial areas of immediate concern, which in turn come to be defined as the whole field. Furthermore, the approach leads us to theories of educational phenomena which, are after all, little more than specialized vocabularies for description in which the emphasis is placed on gathering data and subjecting them to various analytical routines to determine their interrelationships; the interrelationships are as important in this thinking as any meaning which is to be derived from them.

I have yet to be convinced that the I.E.A. studies have yielded anything which is of much use to teachers, researchers, policy makers or administrators. I have managed to wade my way through several of the publications emerging from the research and as I finish each one I am left with the unanswerable question, "So what?" What we do seem to have is evidence of a massive and extremely expensive exercise in the self perpetuation of number-crunching. The numbers themselves tend to be meaningless, the interpretations naive and of little utility. To argue about levels of mathematical achievement or literacy or mastery of French in one country as against another tells us very little about the important features of those observations. Even the earliest comparative educators, perhaps with the exception of a few who (like Mann) had a bowerbird approach, knew that such observations taken out of their cultural context, removed from their realm of meaning within this context, and which did not address any clearly identifiable issue with which the observer was concerned in his home country, were next to useless. Good comparative educators - and there are a few about - might have been able to explain the limitations of the kind of research that was envisaged and might have been able to put the research into different and more meaningful contexts. Most

of the people involved were so busy isolating the "measurable" variables, creating relationships and rotating their orthogonals that they had little time to consider meaning. To accept that somebody is good at counting (as Peaker, Posthelwaite, Finn, Keeves, et al. indisputably are), is not to agree that they know what to count or when to stop counting and start thinking. Statisticians keep implying that if you can't measure it, you don't know what it is. I am more worried about the converse corallary that if you do measure it, you do know what it is! It is equally clear, however, that those of us who adopt the so-called "naturalistic" methodologies, while we may achieve a much higher level of personal awareness and understanding, also have few generalizable insights to offer.

The net result of these difficulties, which are not unique to comparativists, of course, is that it is unquestionably easier to adopt a cosily consistent ideological position and be a critic rather than a performer - if you can stand it. But we all know now that life wasn't meant to be easy and my optimism stems from the belief that there will always be more performers than critics. The performers are well aware that theoretical or methodological breakthroughs are highly unlikely in this age of incremental expansion, but as long as the occasional increment is there, they will press on.

It seems necessary at this point to rehearse the distinction between comparative education and international education, to which I have referred jointly, but not interchangeably. Whereas international education is concerned with the dynamics of interaction between cultures and countries in relation to what goes on in schools and to the interdependence of schools and other social institutions, and may be concerned with modes of action,

comparative education reflects the effort to set together 'systems' of educational phenomena. In this sense, international education is the field concerned with choice and action its methods leading to defensible decisions, in contrast to comparative education, the theoretic, which is concerned with knowledge leading to warranted (and hopefully more generalizable) conclusions.[6] Fischer is, in a sense, implying the same point when he argues that:

> ... comparative methodologies and meaningful cross-cultural comparisons have not emerged and are not likely to be produced from professional and practical education. The academic social sciences, on the other hand, have a natural interest in defining and testing comparison.[7]

Although much comparative education research emerges from and should feed back into professional and practical education, the widespread failure to 'follow-through' at the critical point - i.e. at the point of actually comparing - has left the discipline to some extent in limbo:

> ... insofar as investigators actually prefer the by-products of quanta of information or concept validation to the main goal of explanation, they are settling for second best.[8]

It may well be that international and comparative education, unable to recruit the omnicompetent scholars required by Bereday,[9] and brought to a rather unhappy state of affairs by inveterate and unexamined reliance on theory, could well become moribund, unable by its present methods and principles to continue its work meaningfully.

Again, the problem is not that theory <u>per se</u> is inappropriate, but that the methodologies extant are inadequate to the task which the field sets them.

The second aspect of my presidential address to cause concern was simply a further expression of an ambivalence I share with many of my colleagues. Hundreds upon hundreds of "experts" in education, some describing themselves as comparative and/or international educationists, have been working in the field, e.g. in Third World countries, as teachers, consultants, researchers, advisers and planners. Many of these "experts" fall into Campbell's over-advocacy trap - that is, they give advice or "solve" problems with an assurance quite out of keeping with the scientific status of the subject, and to exacerbate the situation they often fail to be interested in finding out what happens when their advice is followed.[10] Campbell's cop-out statement that the job of what he calls "the methodologist" for the experimenting society is not to say what is to be done, but rather to say what has been done, thus giving "neutral" advice to the decision-making politicians, is unrealistic. But for those functioning as comparative or international educationists perhaps it should be equally unacceptable to espouse as their main goals such objectives as: (i) the production of an East-West synthesized value system (in which "superior" Western values remain dominant; (ii) the production of leaders and skilled workers; (iii) the orderly dissemination and assimilation of attitudes which will assist in the "development" process; (iv) the training of specialists (e.g. educational planners) in the wealthy Western nations who are able to impart Western techniques; (v) the provision of consultancy services (often through which the concentrated services of a university can be used to grapple with specific development problems); and so on. This is not to claim that these goals are not important for developing countries, but simply to point out that they tend to be assumed by the West rather than analyzed or defended, allowing unsupported biases to slip undetected

into 'descriptive' research. The implied prescriptions are often incomplete, inconsistent and misused. Examples are to be found in the goals of development and, more particularly, educational development. In providing even qualified support for the conventional Western theories and techniques of development, even with the best intentions, we tend to perpetuate dependency and exploitative relationships.

The economists, particularly, have been responsible for the growth syndrome by perpetrating the notion that economic theory is central to economic life, whereas it is patently obvious that economic growth or decline take place quite independently of theoretical notions. Of all the gospels that European man has felt compelled to teach to others, the one concerned with the increase of wealth has most readily captured the ear and the imagination of mankind. Whereas Christianity and parliamentary democracy have won converts in the world only by displacing other powerful ideas, the acceptance of European economic tenets (and especially the doctrine that through the application of science and technology - capital formation - man can lift himself from poverty to a position to determine his economic lot) almost seems to have filled some kind of vacuum. Equally clearly, however, the European colonizers created the vacuum which they then set out to fill!

Our chief export is the notion that our cultural environment (including our educational, social and political institutions) represents "development" and that the cultural environment of the (the often all-too-willing) importing countries represents "underdevelopment". Clearly, our notion of cultural superiority is exemplified by material well-being. I seem to recall that Ghandi, when he was asked what he thought about Western civilization, replied that he thought it would be a good idea!

The level of thinking which accepts the differences between ourselves and the people of the third world as having historical cause, and therefore as relative; which accepts our material dominance and our materialist outlook as proof of our cultural superiority; which accepts the historical progression through which the west has come as the inevitable course of progression for the third world, is the most devastating form of imperialism. The idea that our culture is superior because it was carried by the people of North Atlantic to their colonies across the globe is cultural jingoism.

The acknowledgement of these assumptions about underdevelopment implies the rejection of a series of development models which grew out of theoretical assumptions about the process of economic growth.

Myrdal summarizes the point nicely:

> Our main point is that while in the Western world an analysis in "economic" terms - markets and prices, employment and unemployment, consumption and savings, investment and output - that abstracts from the modes and levels of living and from attitudes, institutions and culture may make sense and lead to valid inferences, an analagous procedure plainly does not in underdeveloped countries ... The newest attempts to anlayse, education (and health) in terms of "investment in man" do not even state the problem in a rational way.[11]

This is not the appropriate place to debate the appropriateness of expressions such as third world, development, modern, backward, etc., but we should also acknowledge that "our languaging process is fully implicated in any and all of our attempts to assess reality".[12]

The role of education in the development process has until recently been complementary to other economic applications and, as such, it has been consistently described as quantitative, formal, institutionalized, and directed towards occupational training.

One of the basic problems, of course, is that the school, particularly at the secondary level, often exists in isolation from its cultural context and produces a product - i.e. a student - who is adapted neither to the traditional culture nor to the needs of a modern industrial society. The philosophy upon which the schools are based, the subject matter offered, the pedagogical methods employed, and sometimes the background of the staff, all contribute to this apparent dysfunctionality.

It is thus apparent that formal education is dysfunctional in its contribution to the solution of broad social and economic problems except for the training of a relatively small number of students in the elitist tradition who take up key positions in government, business and industry.

Clearly, education is a colonial relationship: we can view the teacher as the colonizer of the minds of his pupils just as we can view the dominance-dependency relationship between wealthy and poor countries as colonizing, or neo-imperialistic. While, in intellectual terms, we may now claim to "know better", we are surely tending towards a different kind of patronizing relationship, but the implications are similar - that is, in our new-found wisdom, we are still telling developing countries what they should be doing - or at least that they should not be following the "developed West" into its military-industrial quagmire. This too is imperialism: less exploitative, less harmful, less domineering, but equally a form of intellectual colonisation with wide-ranging social, economic and cultural implications. Having led many countries to the brink of the quagmire already, can we still claim the moral superiority which is implied when we try to tell others what their aspirations should be? As I have said elsewhere:

> It is unquestionably easier for groups of people in the developed countries who are rea ting against the consumer rat-race to take up their well-thumbed Whole Earth Catalogues and opt out of the system against which they have become inured, than it is for people who are looking forward to but have not yet tasted the "benefits' of mass consumption to do the same thing. And it would be extremely difficult, without totalitarian mechanisms controlling the information channels, to persuade them that they should reject the values of the competitive consumer society.[13]

In most countries, even those which have attempted to revamp the role and image of the school, such as Tanzania (in earlier days), Cuba and the Peoples Republic of China, where the model of development has been radically indiginized, there continues to be faith in the schools as a necessary if not sufficient condition for development, which is a difficult position ot refute. All it is saying, in effect, is that schools are geared to socialise youngsters into the dominant culture, and that schools reflect group aspirations. Short of deschooling, it is little short of ridiculous to imagine the institutionalized school or even non-formal education doing anything else.

So we seem to keep coming back to a basic query, which is "are we asking the right questions?" Clearly we are not (although this does not presuppose that we know what the right questions are).

There would probably be fairly substantial agreement that the basic problem in the developing world today is poverty, while there would certainly be substantial disagreement about the causes of that poverty. A primary correlate (whether as a dependent or an independent variable or both) is population. Population growth is hampering all attempts to develop in terms of the traditional development model. Despite the massive campaigns of the so-called Development Decades to eradicate illiteracy in

Africa, for example, since the Addis conference, there are now more illiterates in absolute terms than ever before. If it looks like a losing battle, perhaps it is because the battle is against the wrong enemy. Again we are forced to ask "What are the prior questions?" The situation also highlights the important questions about expert input from the West raised above.

This emphasizes a difficult dilemma, in that it is the very experiences shared by workers in the international field which provide much of the grist for the mill of comparative and international studies. Herein, I would suggest, lies the resolution of the dilemma: more study of educational phenomena in other countries, and less advice, could renew an old and, I am convinced, valid function for comparative and international education. The melioristic aims of the pioneers - Jullien, Cousin, Sadler, Harris, Arnold and others - led them to enterprises in selective cultural espionage. What I would argue for now - given that we know a great deal more about the dangers of uncritical borrowing - is an approach to the systematic study of the educational problems and proposed solutions of other countries and cultures in terms of the difficulties we diagnose in our own culture. In other words, our work should be directed towards the betterment of our own education, just as others would be free to study and learn from what we do.

Unfortunately, there is no code of ethics in the "development business" which will prevent experts from plying their trade throughout the third world, and equally unfortunately, as I have emphasized, the production of educational systems and thought patterns can be seen to take effect in the developed countries, while the consumption of these patterns takes place in

the developing countries. But if we were to stop actively interfering, then at least developing countries could make more realistic choices. The elements of imperialism will remain, for the elites of the Third World have not been slow to grasp the significance of the role of institutionalized education as a social control mechanism, and the West would certainly remain the focus of study for much of the third world, but there are moral differences (for comparative/international education) in terms of who is imposing what upon whom.

As I pointed out earlier, this is an ambivalence-creating situation which we tend to discuss at a higher level of valuation than we tend to operate. I have worked in developing countires (as a vehicle for sensitizing and informing myself at first had of the prevailing problems and attitudes), and I have no doubt I shall do so again, but the problem remains, and does not simply go away by saying, "If I did not accept this [job, consultancy, etc.] then someone else, probably worse, would".

What I have tried to do in this "letter from home" is explore some of the tensions, both intellectual and at the level of feeling, of the practising comparativist. It is my firm belief that the tensions in the discipline, or than in the individual, are not going to be resolved by intellectual and ideological gamesmanship, so much as by a general recognition of what is tantamount to a moral position in terms of what we can and cannot do.

There are very few people around these days who are "comparativists", although there are many who adopt comparative dimensions in thier work on curriculum, higher education, etc. Whether those of us who are left will go the way of the dodo, or whether comparative and international studies will rise from the ashes depends in large measure upon the ways in which we come to grips with some of the issues raised in this paper.

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